

Relative Major and Minor

For every major key there is a relative minor key. Conversely, for every minor key there is a relative major key. In short, these relative keys share the same set of notes (the following red lettering denotes the tonic of the scale).

For example, the key of C major contains the following set of notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B; while the key of A minor has the same set of notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B. Because these scales share the same notes, they have a special relationship that we refer to as being “relative.” Since “A” is the tonic or key in “A minor,” we usually see the notes written in this order: A, B, C, D, E, F, G (as a side note, it’s common practice to start and end scales with their tonic note). This works the same for all keys.

The key of G major contains the following set of notes: G, A, B, C, D, E, F#; while the key of E minor has the same set of notes: G, A, B, C, D, E, F# - making them relative as well. However, we would usually see the notes in the key of E minor written in this order: E, F#, G, A, B, C, D.

So why should we care about the subject of relative major and minor? Because it will literally double your productivity in regards to music theory, lead guitar and a myriad of other applications. With this knowledge, knowing one major scale would allow you to play over any major or minor chord progression! More on that later!

So make sure you read this entire section through several times until you get the concept. It’s invaluable knowledge that will increase your understanding of the fret board and music in general.

Now let me show you the easiest way to find the relative major or minor of any song in any key. Here is the rule: If you know the major key that you are in, move down exactly one and a half steps, or 3 frets on the same string and that specific note’s name will be the relative minor key.

For instance, let’s say we are looking for the relative minor of G major. On the low E string, play the G on the third fret. Moving down three frets or one and a half steps from this fret will bring you to the open E. Remember how we said earlier that G major’s relative minor was E minor?

Let’s try another example with C major. So play C on the A string, which is the third fret. Moving down three frets or one and half steps from this fret will bring you to the open A. Remember how we said earlier that C major’s relative minor was A minor?

I can feel you getting it!

Okay, let's try one last one for the key of D major. On the open A string play the D, which is the 5th fret. Now you try it yourself. What was the rule? Move down 3 frets or one and a half steps. You should have discovered the "B" at the 2nd fret. So B minor is the relative minor of D major. Conversely, if a song is in a minor key and you want to define the relative major, you just do the opposite by moving up 3 frets.

If you wanted to find the relative major of A minor, you would move up three frets from the open A, which would give you a "C". See how easy that is?

So here's the fun part! If you know any songs in a minor key, find out what the tonic is, move up 3 frets from the tonic and you have your relative major. Now you can play that major scale over the song in the minor key and it will sound harmonic or pleasant to your ear. It's helpful to know the entire major and minor scales but I will sometimes use this technique to play a scale that I'm less familiar with to see if it produces different melodies and licks that differ from what I might normally play.

So now you might be saying to yourself, "*Why even differentiate between a major key and its relative minor if they use the exact same notes?*" Think about the subject of a speech for a moment. If I said that I was doing a speech about war, it could be in support of war or against war – depending on how I phrase things. This speech on war might include keywords like: money, defense, lives, freedom, etc., but HOW I use these words determines my stance.

Get it?

The relative major/minor relationship is very similar in that we are using the same notes (words and phrases of the speech), but we are saying it differently in each scenario and emphasizing different notes as per what key we are in. Also, think of the actual subject of the speech as the tonic. The tonic of the key is often times the note that is used to end a musical phrase. So if we were in the key of A minor, many of our phrases will end with an A, while in the key of C major many of our phrases would end with a C.

As you know by now, I am a big advocate of putting things learned into **practice immediately**. If these concepts make sense to you without picking up a guitar, then they might stick with you for a little while. However, putting them to practice immediately will make them a VERY real part of you – so don't sell yourself short!

Your homework is to find the key of any song. How do you do that? For a small amount of folks, you will be able to do this "by ear." For those that have not developed this technique yet (yes this is a LEARNED skill), find out the key to the song of your choice using any means available (ask a friend, do a Google search, watch a tutorial, grab the sheet music, JUST DO IT!!).

If a song is in a major key, find its relative minor using the above method. Or even better yet, if

it's in a minor key, find its relative major and try your hand at “noodling” the major scale over the top of that song. To start off you may just play the scale up and down, but as that becomes boring to you, try to come up with your own phrases, licks or musical ideas. No matter how simple or silly you think they may sound, they are the workings of great masterpieces.

EVERY composer, rock star, and songwriter has started at these simple steps. They are CRUCIAL and you going through the exercises are going to make you the guitar player that you envision.

Now go pick up your guitar!!

Although you already know how to do this without the below cheat sheet, here's a list of each major scale and its relative minor.

C b major – A b minor

G b major – E b minor

D b major – B b minor

A b major – F minor

E b major – C minor

B b major – G minor

F major – D minor

C major – A minor

G major – E minor

D major – B minor

A major – F# minor

E major – C# minor

B major – G# minor

F# major – D# minor

C# major – A# minor